

Chapter Forty One

The Eternal Lord

Bixly had watched the door slam shut in his face with the sinking feeling that it might as well have been the headsman's axe striking down on his exposed neck. The cold look in the wizard's eyes and the harsh certainty in his words had left little doubt about what *he* thought would happen to Bixly the moment he made his presence known to Khaos. The memory of the day he'd been marked by the dragon lord flooded back to him. How he'd watched with wide-eyed horror as the great lizard had launched himself into air already breathing fire upon spotting the pot boy. The flame had missed Bixly while still coming close enough to sing the hair off of one of his arms—some of the other creatures gathered near their master hadn't been so lucky. At the time Bixly had told himself that it hadn't been luck at all, that Lord Khaos had carefully spared his newest, and certainly most treasured subject. After all, Bixly was *human*, and he'd come to Khaos of his own free will. Believing that was easy to do after Khaos had marked him and sent him back to Ehlsewhere, after giving Bixly orders to begin encouraging others to commit to the dragon's will, but not so easy after Ohrder slammed the door shut and it winked out of existence. Once that had happened Bixly had been so petrified by fear that he'd hadn't walked more than a dozen paces before finding a hollowed out depression under a fallen tree to crawl into and there he had stayed trying to work up the courage to do...*what?* Truthfully, he didn't have a clue what he should do next.

It was hard to concentrate on coming up with a plan because his mind kept churning over the events of the past few days. Understandably, his confrontation with Ol' Whinc dominated his thoughts. It had all seemed so perfect. Bixly knew the old man had been ordered to start treating everyone better; he'd learned of that a few days before when he'd overheard the prince giving the stable master a firm talking to. And Ol' Whinc *was* being much more cordial, but Bixly knew that to be nothing more than a façade, one that would fade away the moment the old man's masters turned their attention elsewhere. But what had really set things in motion was seeing the pot boy—all dressed up in his fancy clothing and strutting through the stable like *he* was the lord of the place. That's when he remembered how eager Khaos had been to kill the boy. At that point, Bixly had known exactly what he needed to do. It turned out it wasn't hard at all to spur Ol' Whinc into reverting to his former ways; a few handfuls of dust rubbed into the coat of the prince's stallion more than did the trick. And while he'd thought that going through with the actual deed—killing the old man, might be difficult, he'd been so caught up in the moment that his rage fueled thrusts had actually led to uncontrolled laughter, even as Ol' Whinc's expression slowly began to transform, from anger, to fear, and finally to outright horror, right before his eyes finally became dull and lifeless. Tuvor's reaction to witnessing the event was far from gleeful, but he'd been easy enough to convince of what needed to happen next. Then it was just a matter of letting things play out. As Bixly was making his way back to his room to change clothes he was already imagining the praise Lord Khaos would heap on him for not only killing one of the hated nobility, but for also orchestrating things so that the pot boy would be the one blamed and executed for doing it. It had seemed such a perfect plan.

As Bixly lay there in his makeshift shelter reliving those events there was no exhilaration left within him, only regret. That is not to say he was repentant—*not at that point*. While it was true he would have done anything to turn back the hands of the clock, the tears he blinked back were not for the man he'd murdered. They had nothing to do with the fact that Ol' Whinc would never

see his wife, children or grandchildren again. But regret is a seed that can grow into something deeper, *if it's* properly cultivated and watered. In this case the gardener was Princess Behlize.

The other encounter that Bixly found himself rehashing had taken place a few days prior the fateful encounter in the stable. He'd been out walking with Hildie, the pretty young kitchen maid he'd had his eye on for quite some time, and his attraction to her only grew once he discovered how likeminded they were on Lord Khaos and his illuminating words. Hildie had told him about Princess Chahrity's efforts to mend relationships within the royal kitchen; supposedly the princess had done such a thorough job of convincing the royal cook to change her ways that Mistress Lehwellen had called her entire staff together and begged them to forgive her "*tyrannical*" behavior. When Hildie had told him about it, Bixly had laughed it off as being nothing more than a ruse, though the naïve girl was more inclined to think the cook's conversion was genuine. But in Bixly's opinion that had more to do with Mistress Lehwellen promoting Hildie to chief pastry and cake decorator than anything else. But it wasn't Princess Chahrity or the head cook that surprised the two of them by stepping out of the darkness onto the path in front of them.

Bixly had never so much as laid eyes on the Lahndsend royal before, but Hilde had immediately dropped down in a curtsy as she exclaimed, "Good evening, Princess Behlize." Bixly had then reluctantly executed the expected bow and greeting, even if the former was as stilted as you could get, and the later came out through clinched teeth. It only took a moment to discover that the visiting princess hadn't just "*stumbled*" upon them either.

"Liking a lie doesn't make it true," Princess Behlize had told them cryptically after motioning for them to rise up. "What the dragon...or anyone else," she paused. She'd been looking at Hildie, but her eye's purposely drifted over to land on Bixly. "Tells you about nobles being inherently evil isn't true, Hildie. You've seen that with your own eyes. They aren't perfect, but they can be repentant...*as we all need to be.*"

"*We*...don't have anything to repent of," Bixly was so incensed at the princess' words that he purposely left off her honorarium.

Behlize had just looked at him for a moment. In a way it felt like she was truly seeing him for the very first time, and her next words had seemed to back that up. "You believed everything he said *before* he even spoke to you...that's why you went to him, isn't it, Bixly? But, I promise you, he *is not* who you think he is!"

The fact that she had known his name had startled him, but then when she'd practically read his mind, Bixly was torn between wanting to shout at her to shut up, or to turn and run as far and fast away from her as possible. Instead, he'd found himself answering, "He's the *renderer*...he's the promised one, and *nothing* can stand against him!"

The princess had looked at him with such pity then. "The dragon's coming was foretold, but it was a *warning*, not a promise. *He is not* the one who spoke, and speaks still. There is one almighty, eternal Lord, the God of all creation, who laid the foundation of the world and set the stars in the sky. But that is not who your dragon is. If you just stop and think about it, Bixly, you already know that...my understanding is that you watched him try...*and fail*, to kill one young boy the other day. Isn't that right...?"

Bixly wanted to hurl her lies back in her face—a part of him wanted nothing more than to wrap his fingers around her throat and silence the poison she was spewing out of her mouth once and for all. Of course he couldn't do that. While he couldn't see any soldiers nearby, royals never went anywhere without their protectors. So, instead he turned and walked away, but not fast enough to avoid hearing her final shouted warning.

“The dragon and his followers are doomed...forever doomed,” the Princess’s words chased him down the path. “It’s not too late to change your course, Bixly...if your legs are leading you down the path of destruction, you would be better served to cut them off than to be eternally damned.”

He’d tried to banish the memory of his confrontation with the princess into the farthest reaches of his mind, but they refused to stay away. Eventually, as he huddled in his little hidey hole under the fallen tree, while the scene played out over and over again, instead of continuing to rail against it, Bixly began to ponder what the princess might actually have meant by what she said? *He who spoke, who speaks still?* Like most citizens of Ehlsewhere, the idea of a single all-powerful god wasn’t anything new to Bixly. Some believed it, others had different theories. No one that Bixly knew seemed to really give it much thought. If there was such a being, he didn’t seem overly interested or involved with things. *Except...if the prophesy was true—and coming true*, didn’t that mean he *was* involved? But the Lahndsend princess claimed that Khaos *wasn’t* that supreme being; and it was hard to refute what she’d said about the dragon not being able to kill the pot boy; Bixly *had* seen how Khaos had turned and fled when the boy had drawn his sword—you don’t run from something unless you’re afraid, and you’re not afraid if you’re an almighty being. There was no doubting that the dragon was powerful, but Bixly couldn’t make himself believe Khaos had created the world and stars above.

So *who* had...and more importantly...was whoever it was really going to eternally damn him for following the dragon as the princess had inferred? She had certainly seemed confident that was the case. The thought left Bixly feeling cold and dead inside; he’d felt hopeless before in his life, but never to the degree that gripped him as he considered his future and his options—*limited as they were*. Choice number one, go find Khaos and hope the dragon lord didn’t see him as a traitor to be burned alive as the wizard had predicted he would—but did that matter if it eventually resulted in his *eternal* damnation? Bixly didn’t have any more understanding of what that might entail than he did about God, but simply realizing that it must mean something horrible—that lasted *forever*, was enough to make him break out in a cold sweat. But was there any way to avoid it? *If your legs are leading you down the path of destruction, it is better to cut them off than to be eternally damned*. The princess’ final shouted warning echoed through him again. As dire as the words were, they told him exactly what he needed to do—*though he had little doubt about what would happen when he did it*. Everyone had heard the rumors about the pot boy somehow knowing how to kill the dragon lord’s beasts—likely that was why Khaos was afraid of him. Bixly still wasn’t quite sure what the boy had meant that just hanging wouldn’t kill him, but looking down at the swollen red “K” carved into the back of his right hand, he accepted what had to come next. His legs weren’t the thing leading him down the wrong path, and dying wasn’t his biggest problem. Gritting his teeth with resolution, even as tears began to flow from his eyes, Bixly drew his knife out of its sheath—the one he’d used to end Ol’ Whinc’ life, and then he began to cut.

Eight sets of eyes had watched Bixly disappear from sight as the door to the wizard’s portal swung closed; one pair of them had belonged to Hildie the kitchen maid. She still wasn’t sure why Princess Chahrity had come to the kitchen and asked her to accompany her to the wizard’s chambers. Chahrity had told her something terrible had happened and she didn’t want Hildie to find out about it through gossip mongers. As soon as she’d learned that the ‘*something*’ was Ol’ Whinc’s murder, Hildie had tried to prepare herself for the worst. That fear was realized when she’d followed the princess into the wizard’s chambers and saw Bixly standing frozen like a

statue off to one side. Though the rest of him seemed to be completely immobilized, Hildie saw his eyes darting around fearfully, until they came upon her, and there they'd stayed. As hopeless as things seemed, she'd tried to give him a reassuring smile, but at that very same instant, a flash of light appeared at the center of the room and a moment later, when it had faded away, Begone, the pot boy, and Bixly's friend, Tuvor, were left standing there. Hildie had never been present when magic had been performed before, but she'd had no doubt that's what she'd just witnessed.

Then all hope that Bixly *wasn't* the one who had killed the stable master—or at least that he'd had good reason, was dashed as Tuvor described what had happened. Hildie was horrified by what she heard. She, like Bixly and Tuvor, had grown to hate how most nobles tended to treat them, acting like they were just property instead of people—but *murder*? She wasn't sure how she felt about Bixly—*was it love*? Sometimes she thought so. Nor was she at all certain Bixly had *any* romantic interest in her. But the lost hope of what might have been stabbed her in the heart like a knife as the prince had banished Bixly from ever setting foot in Ehlsewhere again. In fact, if she'd understood what had just transpired correctly, Bixly's only real choice was to pick his means of dying; under the headsman's axe or at the hands of Khaos, the dragon lord. That second part confused her; Bixly had been so convinced that the Khaos had come to set them all free, and she had wanted to believe that, oh, how she'd wanted to believe that. But the other thing's Princess Behlize had said about Khaos' true nature—and *the look on Bixly's face right before the door shut, left her feeling as if every drop of hope had been drained out of her—as it obviously had for him*.

"Are you all right?" Princess Chahrity asked gently. Tuvor had departed and the princes and Begone were across the room speaking with the wizard, who Hildie couldn't even look at without wanting to turn and run out of the room as fast as the stableman had a few minutes earlier.

"What about mercy...and second chances?" She directed her question to Princess Behlize, since it was she who had been so adamant about Hildie taking advantage of hers.

"Prince Juhstice asked him if he had anything he wanted to say for himself, and you heard his response," Princess Chahrity said with a note of frustration in her voice, reaching out to put a hand on Hildie's arm.

Hildie shook her off and turned back to Princess Behlize, the pleading look on her face practically begging for an answer, one the royal seemed hesitant to give. Finally, casting a quick glance in Chahrity's direction, Behlize looked Hildie square in the face and told her, "True mercy doesn't come from anyone in this room...but it's not too late for Bixly. He can cry out to the true Lord at any time. If he does that, Hildie, he *will* be heard."

Hildie wanted to believe what the princess had said, but there was still a problem. "How is he supposed to know to do that?"

The princess' dropped eyes were all the answer she needed. With a cry, Hildie turned and fled the room, ignoring the voices of the two princess calling for her to wait. She didn't stop, not until she was standing before a little stone hut built into the side of the city wall. Hildie's father worked as a carpenter's assistant—*by day*; many of his nights were spent in the Royal Forest adding to the meager amount of food his wages could put on the table for his large family. The hut was originally one of the access points to the city sewers—and it still was, but some enterprising soul had come along at some time in the past and expanded its use to include a hidden route out of the city, and they'd managed to do that without drawing the attention of the Watch. As the oldest child, Hildie had helped her father bring the fruits of his midnight foraging through the passageway, so she knew the hut and the passage beyond quite well.

The hut had a lock, but it was long rusted open and the door squeaked only a little as she ducked inside. Two minutes later she was on the outside of the city walls ready to start her trek to the forest—*what was left of it*. Burned as it was, it was still a massive place to find one lost soul, but Hildie had seen something through the wizard's portal that gave her hope. Just beyond the point where Bixly had stood poised in the doorway she'd noticed a large rock rising up, one that had a distinctly horse-head shape to it. As a kitchen worker, she and the other girls were often sent into the forest to gather roots, herbs, berries and other fruits, and almost as often they'd found times to play upon that same rock. Hildie only hoped that when she got to it, Bixly would still be close by, and that she could find him before one of the dragon's beasts did, and that...well there were so many things that *could* go wrong. She just had to...*pray*, that's what Princess Behlize called it, that things would work out. She sure hoped the princess' God really was listening, because Hildie had no doubt that she needed his help.

"What was that all about?" Chahrity turned to asked Behlize after watching Hildie bolt from the room. It was like Behlize and the kitchen maid were speaking in a different language; which was doubly odd because Chahrity hadn't even realized the two had met before.

Behlize stood quartered toward the now empty doorway with a troubled look on her face for a few long seconds before finally turning to reluctantly back at her. "After hearing what Shahdow told us about what he'd *sensed* in Hildie, I decided to seek her out...to talk to her about what would happen to her if she continued down the path she was on. I spoke to her on more than one occasion, and during one of those times that young man, Bixly, was there as well."

"Talk to her about what?" Chahrity asked with confusion. She'd began to think of Behlize as almost a sister—and the way things were going between Juhstice and her, that might very well become even more true. Was her friend keeping things from her? Chahrity certainly didn't want to think that was the case.

"About something I should have discussed with you first...and a long time ago," Behlize told her, suddenly sounding quite convicted. "It's not a short conversation...do you have time to take a walk with me through your mother's garden?"